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ABSTRACT

This digest considers the problems of foreign language instruction in small high schools and discusses possible solutions. A critical challenge for American education, pointed out by reform reports of the 1980's, is improvement of instruction in foreign languages to instill language proficiency. These national concerns have been translated into policy at the state level, but studies show that most foreign language students are enrolled in French and Spanish with far fewer studying German, Chinese, Japanese, or Russian, all thought to be good choices for students. Staff availability parallels enrollment patterns. Multi-level classes, the scheduling of two or more levels of a foreign language into a single class period, are common in small schools. This creates problems of additional preparation and discipline for teachers and reduced oral language experiences for students. Suggestions are made for administrators to help teachers handle this difficult situation. Many state education agencies and universities are trying to help small schools offer foreign languages through interactive video courses delivered via satellite or microwave transmission. State education agencies are recommended as resources of technical assistance about foreign language programs in small schools. It is concluded that committed teachers are the vital key to both program development and program effectiveness. This digest contains 10 references. (DHP)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools April 1989

Proficiency-Oriented Foreign Language in the Small High School

Digest EDO-RC-89-2

VERY LITTLE HAS BEEN WRITTEN about the problems of foreign language instruction in small high schools, and even less about possible solutions. Practitioners and policymakers need help with this issue. This Digest considers national concerns, state initiatives, enrollment patterns, the dilemma of multi-level instruction, technological alternatives, and resources of state education agencies.

National concerns

Into the 1990s foreign language instruction will present a strong challenge to administrators and teachers in small high schools. Most of the reform reports of the 1980s pointed out that a critical task ahead would be to improve instruction in foreign languages.

The challenge is particularly strong because the focus of such reports lies in language **proficiency**, not just in knowledge about languages and cultures in general (see, for example, Strasheim, 1987). Foreign languages are not viewed as a "frill." For example, according to the authors of *A Nation at Risk*, foreign language proficiency is vital to the national interest in business, foreign affairs, the military, and education.

State initiatives

Most of the responses by state education agencies to the national concerns about language proficiency affect small high schools in two ways. Either they call for adding foreign languages to curricula in which they have **never** been offered, or they require more extended sequences of study (Draper, 1984).

States like Nebraska and Indiana have established special diplomas for "rigorous" courses of study, which usually include three or four years of a foreign language. Some states have set foreign language requirements of one or two years as prerequisite to high school graduation. And a large number of states have developed proficiency-based curriculum guides, which they have disseminated to teachers and administrators (Draper, 1984).

In short, the national concerns have been swiftly translated into policy at the state level. Much will need to be done to help these small high schools meet the worthy expectations that the new policies imply.

Enrollment patterns

Most students do not take foreign languages, according to a recent survey (Oxford & Rhodes, 1988). Current enrollments also show that about half the foreign-language enrollments are in Spanish and about one-third are in French (Oxford & Rhodes, 1988; Foreign Language Enrollments, 1984). There are far fewer numbers of students studying German, and even fewer studying Latin (see, for example, LaFleur, 1985). Chinese, Japanese, and Russian—now thought to be good choices for students—all have **very** low enrollments. The availability of staff parallels the enrollment patterns. What is to be done in the small high school? Perhaps the most critical concern is the multi-level class, discussed next.

The dilemma of multi-level classes

Multi-level classes—the scheduling of two or more levels of a foreign language into a single class period—are very common in small high schools. Teachers find multi-level classes difficult for three reasons: planning problems, classroom management challenges, and instructional needs (Strasheim, 1983).

First, multi-level teachers are confronted with multiple "preparations" within a single class. Such planning is an additional burden to these teachers, most of whom must prepare for classes in unrelated disciplines.

Second, multi-level teachers cannot concentrate on the lesson in progress. Instead, they must keep a watchful eye on the other students in the room to monitor seatwork. Discipline problems have the potential of reducing already short contact time.

Finally, the instructional needs of multi-level classes are most serious. Foreign language teachers know that oral experiences are critical to the development of proficiency. Yet students in classes with two levels have only one-half the contact time they might get in their other high school courses! And students do not view languages as "easy" courses: they need all the contact they can get. It is almost impossible to engage the students in one level in oral practice while the teacher is conducting another lesson (with the other level) in the same room. As a result, teachers tend to stress reading and writing at the expense of listening and speaking, a technique—they are well aware—that does not cultivate language proficiency with optimal effectiveness.

When three or even four levels are combined in a single multi-level class, teachers face an exceptionally difficult task. There are, in fact, some small high schools in which the **entire** foreign language sequence is taught in a **single** class in a single period (Lafayette, 1980).

Scheduling the multi-level class

Ideally, teachers' judgment should govern how multi-level classes are set up and how they are scheduled. Teachers know best how they can handle this difficult situation, but administrators can help in several ways by recognizing the following principles (Strasheim, 1983):

- Multi-level classes, especially those due to a need for the teacher's services in another discipline, sometimes become too large to manage. A good enrollment cap for multi-level classes is 20 students.
- Students in the first and second years require far more direction than those in upper levels. Good practice keeps lower-levels in

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separate classes. If lower levels must be scheduled into a multi-level class, they should be scheduled with an upper level, not with each other.

- The most effective multi-level classes are those that combine levels three and four. In this context the teacher can "rotate" the content of two years of instruction, teaching the students as one class, but differentiating assignments in alternate years.
- The period in which lunch is served is usually longer than the others in the school day. Scheduling the multi-level class at this time can give the teacher greater flexibility.
- Different languages should be taught in **separate** classes, not in one. Students trying to work independently become distracted by hearing a different language.
- If the same teacher is teaching two languages, each language should be scheduled back-to-back. Language teachers, who are not usually native speakers, become mentally exhausted switching from one language to another.
- Sometimes schools schedule small-enrollment levels into an unrelated discipline taught by the teacher. This is a very ineffective strategy. Low enrollment (for example, two or three students in a level) is a sign that technologically-delivered instruction is needed.

Technologically-delivered instruction

Many state education agencies and universities are trying to help small schools offer foreign languages through interactive video courses delivered via satellite or microwave transmission. The Nebraska Department of Education, through the Satellite Educational Resources Consortium (SERC), is offering Introductory Japanese to high schools in 18 states in a pilot program. Introductory Japanese, which is based on a curriculum developed at Earlham College, will be offered by SERC as Japanese I in the fall of 1989 (Nebraska Educational Television, 1989). Other examples abound (see for example, Barker, 1987). Teachers and administrators in small high schools can check with the foreign language consultants in state education agencies, who are excellent resources for learning more about technologically-delivered foreign language offerings.

One note of caution needs to be sounded with respect to technologically-delivered instruction. Teacher-to-student and student-with-language interaction are as critical in technologically-delivered instruction as they are in every type of foreign language class. Available offerings should be carefully examined as to class size (see, for example, Levinson, 1984). Class size should be no more than 35, for when it rises to 100 or more—as is the tendency—meaningful interaction can cease, and the potentially active learner soon becomes a passive spectator and, ultimately, a dropout.

State department resources

State education agencies are rich resources. Their foreign-language consultants can (1) provide information on program development options; (2) supply proficiency-based curriculum guides; (3) provide or identify consultant services; (4) direct staff development meetings and workshops; (5) recommend instructional materials and training opportunities for teachers; (6) link teachers with professional organizations and their activities in the state; and (7) respond to questions and problems as they arise.

If consultants cannot supply information already prepared, they will usually help find it. If the response from your own state department proves unsatisfactory, call the department in a neighboring state for possible resources. Be persistent!

The teacher is vital

The committed teacher is the vital key to **both** program development and program effectiveness. Foreign language teachers in small high schools should be strongly encouraged to attend one professional conference or workshop a semester and be given released time to do so. These teachers need the spiritual uplift, the new ideas, the exposure to inexpensive materials, and, most of all, the chance to meet and talk with colleagues in comparable situations.

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